



International Journal of Leadership in Education

Theory and Practice

ISSN: 1360-3124 (Print) 1464-5092 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tedl20>

Conceptions of early childhood leadership: driving new professionalism?

Margaret Sims, Rhonda Forrest, Anthony Semann & Colin Slattery

To cite this article: Margaret Sims, Rhonda Forrest, Anthony Semann & Colin Slattery (2015) Conceptions of early childhood leadership: driving new professionalism?, International Journal of Leadership in Education, 18:2, 149-166, DOI: [10.1080/13603124.2014.962101](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2014.962101)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2014.962101>



Published online: 29 Sep 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 10024



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 15 View citing articles [↗](#)

Conceptions of early childhood leadership: driving new professionalism?

MARGARET SIMS, RHONDA FORREST, ANTHONY SEMANN
and COLIN SLATTERY

This study reports the understandings of leadership held by 351 Victorian early childhood leaders (ECLs). Internationally, ECLs are expected to drive quality improvement through mentoring and modelling: a concept associated with distributive leadership. However, ECLs often move into leadership positions by accident and are ill-prepared for their role. Complicating their difficulties are extant perceptions of leadership: many follow models of leadership that prevent them from re-conceptualizing leadership in a new, socially constructed form. This impacts significantly on their ability to influence quality improvement. In this study, ECLs saw relational aspects of their role as particularly important, and were much less concerned with critiquing current quality praxis. They saw their role as important in supporting the development of high-quality practice identified in the National Quality Standards. The paper contends that ECLs play an important role in developing the profession's own understandings of quality, and of leadership itself; thus, their lack of engagement in this debate is somewhat concerning. If EC is to continue to evolve as a profession internationally, we need ECLs who excel in quality improvement at the service level, and who are willing to advocate for the ongoing development of professional understandings of quality.

Around the world, quality improvement in early childhood education is being driven through a process of leadership. The assumptions underpinning this are that highly trained early childhood professionals can inspire, mentor, model and coach other staff to improve their practice. However, the nature of this leadership is as yet unclear. Graduates, who may be highly skilled in working with children, are not necessarily prepared to

Margaret Sims is professor of Early Childhood at University of New England, Elm Avenue, Armidale, NSW 2351, Australia. Email: margaret.sims@une.edu.au. Her research focuses around quality in community-based services for young children and their families, diversity and professionalization. She teaches at both graduate and undergraduate level in early childhood and research and supervises postgraduate students. *Dr Rhonda Forrest* lectures in Early Childhood at University of New England, Elm Avenue, Armidale, NSW 2351, Australia. Email: rforrest@une.edu.au. Her teaching and research focus around leadership, and in particular, leadership as it operates in early childhood. She teaches at both graduate and undergraduate level in early childhood and supervises postgraduate students. *Mr Anthony Semann* is one of the directors and founders at Semann & Slattery, PO Box 202, Newtown, NSW 2042, Australia. Email: anthony@semannslattery.com. For the past 15 years he has worked as a researcher, consultant and manager with a broad range of government, non-government and private organizations. He holds expert knowledge in both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. He is currently completing PhD at Macquarie University. His PhD is a study of the nexus between leadership and courage. *Colin Slattery* is a director and founder of Semann & Slattery, PO Box 202, Newtown, NSW 2042, Australia. Email: colin@semannslattery.com. He has held a range of senior executive positions with government agencies, the private sector and non-government organizations for 15 years. For the last 13 years, he has been highly sought after as a change facilitator and coach for individuals and organizations.

work with adults. At the same time, there are questions about the understandings of quality: are these universal and assessable or should quality be more contextual? This is particularly the case in Australia where there is a national quality assurance process that defines quality against which all services are judged. Australian early childhood educational leaders are expected to support other staff to improve their practice against these standards. Degree-trained early childhood teachers are struggling with their role of educational leadership, and, at the same time, struggling to find ways to implement the required quality standards in ways that are appropriate for the contexts in which they work. In this study, we ask: in the current context where the nature of leadership is contested, what are current Victorian¹ early childhood leaders' (ECLs) understandings of leadership in early childhood? Do these understandings create any space for early childhood professionals to socially construct the ongoing evolution/development of the hegemonic early childhood discourse related to quality service delivery?

Professionalization can develop through a top-down approach, where outside agencies (such as governments) create an accepted discourse or through a bottom-up progress where the social constructions of those involved in the field collaboratively shape an agreed discourse (Simpson, 2010). Australia appears to be taking the former path through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Early Childhood Reform Agenda. This currently consists of the National Early Childhood Development Strategy, National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education, national Indigenous Reform Agreement, National Quality Framework and various national workforce initiatives (as summarized in Fenech, 2013). All these documents follow an official discourse about what constitutes a professional early childhood educator. Within this context, ECLs may access extensive professional learning opportunities in this discourse with the intention of up-skilling them to direct, motivate, inspire, model and lead others into trying new ways of conceptualizing and practicing and thus improve the quality of service delivery (Fenech, 2013; Stamopoulos, 2012). Horden (2012) and Osgood (2009), however, argue that such training is aimed at supporting leaders to interpret and follow the official discourse and, whilst it may improve quality, it may not do so through empowering practitioners but rather through disempowering them so they operate in ways that follow the official line and not in alternate ways developed by themselves for themselves. Additional training in the dominant discourse can potentially 'restrict the recognition of viable alternatives', making the dominant discourse appear 'incontestable' (Cumming, Sumsion, & Wong, 2013, p. 224). Whilst this may never have been the intention of those developing the relevant discourse documents (see, e.g. Sumsion et al., 2009), the struggle to interpret and enact them, coupled with a culture of accountability borrowed from the business world (Ishimine, Tayler, & Thorpe, 2009) tends to encourage an approach focusing on understanding and interpreting the 'rules' rather than on debating the intent of the 'rules' and experimenting with a variety of ways relevant to context to achieve the aims underpinning the discourse.

Leaders play a key role in the transmission of the early childhood discourse and there is no doubt that leadership is important in improving the quality of service delivery in early childhood. This is clearly illustrated in the UK where those who have Early Years Professional Status (EYPS), which is advanced training in early childhood pedagogy and leadership, have a significant impact on the quality of service delivery across the entire service in which they work, even when they are not in formal leadership roles (Hadfield et al., 2012). In their final report on EYPS, Hadfield and colleagues found that 87% of EYPS graduates noted increased confidence in their ability to mentor and support colleagues to improve practice and 80% noted more confidence in carrying out improvements in their settings. The EYPS in the UK is clearly successful in creating an official view of quality, and facilitating its expression in practice.

The role played by the EYPS graduates in the UK is a new role for leaders in early childhood and the expectations of this role underpin the policy changes in Australia mandating the presence of university-trained early childhood teachers in early childhood services. Such changes in the enacting of leadership are taking place despite our current poor understanding (Stamopoulos, 2012) and poor theorization of leadership (Ortlipp, Arthur, & Woodrow, 2011). It is common in early childhood for leaders to have moved into leadership positions by accident and as such, they are consequently ill-prepared for the complexities encountered during a process of leading oneself and others. Whilst there are calls for a reconceptualized model of leadership in early childhood (Chalke, 2013; Forrest, 2002; Garrock & Morrissey, 2013; Murray & McDowall Clark, 2013; Semann, 2013; Stamopoulos, 2012), it is clear that extant ECLs are still struggling with a range of existing theories and models of leadership that, in themselves, have created a barrier to the reconceptualizing of leadership (Kreig, Davis, & Smith, *in press*). If there was space for this reconceptualization to occur, individuals, creating their own unique leadership approach, might be capable of undertaking not only the official expectations of leadership, but also be able to advocate and contribute towards the creation of a new, socially constructed form of early childhood leadership which might help to challenge the existing top-down model.

However, the barriers preventing extant ECLs from reconceptualizing leadership are numerous. In a study, conducted by Forrest (2002, 2009) participants positioned time as their enemy, the greatest impediment to effective leadership. This was further supported by a study undertaken by Garrock and Morrissey (2013). These studies point to the need for leaders to develop a new understanding of time as multifaceted rather than as linear: such a reconceptualization may help them move away from traditional time management concepts that do not support their effectiveness.

In both studies, participants' understandings of leadership also functioned as a barrier. A hierarchical understanding of leadership led the Garrock and Morrissey participants to believe a formal role or title was necessary to lend them authority. In her research, Forrest argued that beginning leaders in early childhood lacked a clear self-awareness and

held somewhat traditional views of leadership. These views led them into unreal expectations of their followers who they perceived as passive and willing to receive direction. When followers did not consistently act as expected, the beginning leaders felt frustrated. Forrest argued that developing self-awareness would assist leaders to achieve congruence between their beliefs and their behaviour. In a similar manner, Stamopoulos (2012) argued that leaders needed to reconstruct their views on who they are, what they stood for and what they were trying to achieve before they could improve their effectiveness as leaders.

Traditional views on leadership often conflate various leadership roles. For example, the teachers in the Garrock and Morrissey study (2013) appeared to think that administrative tasks were an essential component of leadership. In their book, Waniganayake, Cheesman, Fenech, Hadley, and Shepherd (2012) talk about the differences between administration, management and leadership but these components of leadership are often assumed to all be a requirement for effective leadership. Other breakdowns of leadership suggest different ways of conceptualizing leadership whereas traditional views tend to assume that they all need to be held within the one person holding the leadership role. For example, Forrest (2002, 2009) discusses pedagogical, organizational mission, administration, personal/interpersonal and advocacy leadership. Stamopoulos (2012) writes of leadership as consisting of professional knowledge, professional identity, using an interpretive lens and developing relational trust. As well as suggesting these aspects of leadership are divisible, all position leadership as something that can be learned rather than an inherent trait that a person either possesses or does not.

Theories supporting these conceptualizations of leadership are beginning to be explored across a broad range of early childhood literature. Theories such as transformational leadership arising from the work of Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), and distributive leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Gronn, 2002) which began in the early 1990s led us to consider relational concepts of leadership. Although highly significant developments in leadership theory, the early iterations still encompassed concepts of power wherein the positional leader influenced the behaviour of somewhat passive followers. Over time, the theories have morphed to the idea that leadership is dynamic and co-constructed by a multitude of players (Gronn, 2002) and that in this way, the members of the organization are constantly adjusting to context and engaging in meaning-making.

Distributed leadership has been problematized with recent empirical evidence showing that some forms of distributed leadership are productive but some are not (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, & Hopkins, 2007). In fact, some practices that fall under the distributed leadership banner can be seen as damaging to organizational change processes, particularly in the conflict between centralization and decentralization and the impact of traditional hierarchical systems (Ho, 2012). This is generally due to the rigid interpretations that may be implemented and lack what Greenberg (1987) originally called 'distributed justice'.

Without applying the justice lens, leaders fail to see that distributed leadership should mean ongoing reflection and in-depth discussion by all

parties to determine ‘how to establish, maintain, change and sometimes reduce or even do without forms of leadership’ (Gronn, 2002, p. 385). This collaborative approach leads to what Alvesson and Spicer (2012) calls ‘deliberated leadership’ entailing a collaborative deliberation about authority.

These concepts are beginning to be discussed and applied in education (Male & Palaologou, 2012) and in early childhood (Grarock & Morrissey, 2013; Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). As distributive leadership proposes that leadership is about staff collaborating to build systematic, multifaceted leadership (Jones, Lefoe, Harvey, & Ryland, 2012) including collective deliberation about authority (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), it is reasonable that in early childhood settings, discussions take place about how to achieve desired outcomes for the service. Sometimes this is reduced to a variety of staff in a service undertaking responsibilities that were once assigned to the positional leader. For instance, the positional leader may unilaterally attribute jobs and roles such as first aide coordinator, policy writer, outdoor play coordinator, etc. This is a limited concept of distributed leadership but one that is common in the field. It denies the essence of dynamic shared leadership that is meant to see all members of the early childhood service engaged in how to make meaning of the service organization and how to move it forward. Unfortunately, by reducing distributed leadership to mere task allocation, the power of collective ownership of organizational effectiveness is lost.

Another example particular to Australian early childhood settings is that of pedagogical leadership which is commonly allocated to a 4-year-trained early childhood professional, who may not be, and often is not, the centre director/co-ordinator. Whereas this can be consistent with distributed leadership, it only gains organizational effectiveness if it reflects ‘... a mutual influence process’ (Grarock & Morrissey, 2013, p. 4). Even still, it must also be recognized that dynamic distributed leadership is not wholly democratized and the collective may determine that in certain situations an autocratic leadership may be appropriate (Grint, 2005).

In the UK, a form of distributed leadership is evident in the pedagogical leadership role of those with the EYPS who were found to have a significant and positive impact on the overall quality of the service in which they worked (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010). In his review of the impact of the EYPS graduates in the UK, Clark (2012) argued that this represented a new form of leadership; one which he called catalytic leadership. This is a form of leadership where the leader inspires changes in the quality of service delivery from a position independent of power. Rather, leadership was effective through the relationships built with other staff members. The leaders in Clark’s study were often unsure of their role (Clark categorized this as the ‘imposter syndrome’—p. 395) and were aware of their lack of authority to direct others. For these practitioners, their self-identity as leaders was initially problematic, and was gradually reconceptualized throughout the study till they were able to reframe both what leadership meant to them and their own identity as leaders.

Whilst these different ideas of leadership are being discussed in the literature, there is little evidence to suggest that they are having an impact on the practice of ECLs in the field in Australia (Fenech, 2013; Forrest, 2002; Ortlipp et al., 2011). In attempting to address this at the level of practice, the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership in Melbourne, Victoria (<https://www.bastow.vic.edu.au/Pages/Home.aspx>) has set up a number of leadership courses focused on school and early childhood leadership. Given the debate around the role of leadership in early childhood (is it about improving quality through following a top-down, official discourse or is it about empowering practitioners to jointly socially construct a new early childhood profession?), it is important to understand current perceptions of leadership in early childhood. This research study aims to achieve just that.

Methodology

This study is underpinned by an interpretivist/social constructivist philosophy: we believe that participants construct their understandings of the world (and in this case, leadership) through their interactions in the social world, both through interactions with peers but also interactions with official discourses. We acknowledge, we are somewhat limited in our data collection methods. Normally, in social constructivist research methods such as narrative interviews are commonly used (Williamson, 2006) in order to develop a shared understanding of participants' world views. Given the nature of our contract with the Bastow Institute, we were limited to the use of online data collection strategies and we were required to ask questions that related to the leadership framework developed by Bastow (Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership, 2007). This combination of requirements shaped the development of the questionnaire and made it necessary to create questions where participants rated their experiences against elements of the leadership framework. Thus, the majority of the questionnaire was quantitative. Despite this, we created as many opportunities as possible in our online questionnaire to enable participants to share their perspectives in their own words.

Participants

Participants were those who applied for, and were accepted, in a leadership course in early childhood run by the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership in Melbourne, Victoria from 2010 to 2013 inclusive. There was only one selection criterion for application to the course set by the Bastow Institute and this simply stated: 'Early childhood professionals responsible for leading a team, service, cluster or network' (Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership, 2012). The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development provided funding to backfill participants' time when they were attending workshops associated with the course, and we believe this helped make access to the course as equitable as possible.

Three hundred and fifty one (351) self-identified Victorian ECLs were accepted into the course and constitute the sample for this study. Before commencing the course, participants were required to complete a pre-course survey. This identified the following characteristics of each cohort (see Table 1).

Most of the community owned and managed services were stand-alone centres (56.4% 2010, 50% 2011, 51% 2012, 64.7% 2013) or part of a large (umbrella) organization (30.7% in 2010, 41.7% in 2011, 44% in 2012, 23.5% in 2013). Some came from stand-alone private centres (45% in 2010, 13% in 2011, 42.9% in 2012 and 28.6% in 2013). Given they needed to identify as leaders, it is not surprising that a large number of participants were Directors/Managers who co-ordinated day-to-day service management (60% in 2012, 40.6% in 2011, 38% in 2012, 25.9% in 2013). A number were Director/Managers who had a mixed managerial and teaching role (23.3% in 2012, 29.6% in 2013—the question was not asked in this format in 2010 and 2011 so a direct comparison is not available). In 2011, 29% were Managers of an Early Intervention Service but none were in this role in 2013; however, in 2012, 4% identified themselves as early intervention workers. This role was not identified in 2010. Other roles included early childhood teachers (18% in 2012, 25.9% in 2013), Educational/Pedagogical Leader and Field Officer/Advisor. More participants held an Associate Degree/Diploma (38.8% 2010, 33.3% 2011, 48.8% in 2012, 42.9% 2013) and Bachelor Degree (26.5% 2010, 23.2% 2011, 23% in 2012, 28.6% 2013) than other forms of qualifications, and a small proportion were currently studying (25.9% in 2012, 17.9% in 2013). The majority of those currently studying (9.4% in 2012, 10.7% in 2013) were undertaking a Bachelor's degree. There were a range of people with other qualifications including: PhD or EdD, Graduate Diploma in Community Health, Masters in Special Education, Bachelor of Commerce, Bachelor of Social Work, Master of Creative Arts Therapy, Bachelor equivalent (Div 1 Nursing) and Diploma of Practice Management. Most had between 5 and 15 years experience in the profession (44.9% 2010, 40.2% 2011, 47.7% in 2012, 54.4% 2013) and there are slightly more in the 2012 cohort with more than 25 years experience (2010 10.2%, 2011 13.1%, 17.2% 2012, 2013 10.4%).

We cannot claim the sample of leaders is representative of ECLs in Australia, and have provided a thorough description of the sample in

Table 1. Description of participants

The organizational context of my services' management is:	2010 %	2011 %	2012 %	2013 %
State Government	Not asked	15	6.9	3.4
Community owned and managed service	39.8	21.5	25.9	29.3
Privately owned and managed	22.4	22.4	37.9	27.6
Local government managed	26.5	27.1	16.7	25.9
Other	11.2	14	12.6	13.8

order to allow judgements to be made about the sample, and the likelihood that the views held by these participants are reflective of the views of other ECLs across Australia.

Method

Before commencing the course, participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire (using Survey Monkey) where they were asked a number of questions aimed at exploring their perceptions of leadership in early childhood, their expectations of the course and the issues they were currently finding most challenging. This paper is only focusing on the questions relating to participants' perceptions of leadership in early childhood. Our aim is to use the pre-course data to explore participants' understandings of leadership before these were influenced in any way by the course they were about to attend. It is neither our purpose in this paper to explore the leadership course itself nor its impact on participants' skills, knowledge or perceptions, but rather their understandings of leadership before undertaking specialist training in early childhood leadership.

The questions selected from the questionnaire as relevant for this paper are below:

- What do you think are the most important things an ECL should have the capacity to do?
- What indicators of leadership potential would you identify as important in early childhood professionals at the start of their career? (i.e. what do we look for to identify a leader of the future?)
- In your experience, what personal characteristics (if any) do you consider to be important to being an effective leader in an early childhood setting?
- What do you think is special about leadership in the sector, compared to leadership in other sectors or professions?

Bastow requires their *Developmental Learning Framework for School Leaders* (Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership, 2007) to be used in the construction of leadership courses and this framework defines particular elements which constitute leadership. These were used to identify elements relating to each of the first three questions above and participants were asked to rate these elements for each question using a four-point scale: 1 = not important, 2 = not very important, 3 = fairly important and 4 = very important. A rating average of 3 and above signifies that the participants rated the characteristic relatively highly. The fourth question was open-ended and participants could answer it using text. Thus, our data are both qualitative and quantitative.

Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using a constant comparative approach as originally outlined by Glaser (1965). In this approach, as many codes

as possible are appended to each incident. A comparison is then made between items with the same code in order to develop the theoretical properties of each theme. In reporting the quotes, the year and the number assigned to the participant by survey monkey is used as this sufficiently protects the participants' anonymity.

For the quantitative data, an average rating for each item on each question was calculated by Survey Monkey. A one-way ANOVA (SPSS) was undertaken to compare the average ratings across the three years in order to determine if there were significant variations between different cohorts in perceptions. ANOVA results are reported associated with each table. In addition to the rating score, items within each question were ranked in order, with 1 being assigned to the item with the highest rating (i.e. the item participants considered the most important).

Results

Work is a major source of identity and our work or professional identities contribute significantly to our feelings of worth (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010). Where we are able to have a positive professional identity, we are able to manage work-based stress more effectively and are more productive and perform better (Dutton et al., 2010; Rise, Sheeran, & Hukkelberg, 2010). Positive professional identities are enhanced when the profession is highly valued by others, when it encapsulates virtues that are valued by society and when professional identity is congruent with other personal identities so that an individual's multiple identities complement each other. Where we feel our professional identity is undervalued we are more likely to perform poorly (Inzlicht & Kang, 2010). Professional identity is closely associated with one's commitment to the profession and longevity of employment in the sector (Watt & Richardson, 2008). The data reported here indicate that these EC leaders clearly value their work, which is a positive step towards achieving the improvements in quality that are the stated outcomes of the current early childhood agenda. This is demonstrated through their comments about the importance of the work they do and its implications for the future:

It is a very unique profession. We are caring for and nurturing an individual person's most prized possession everyday! A huge responsibility and privilege. (2011 – 02)

Leadership in this sector is special because it has the power to shape the children of tomorrow. (2011 – 97)

We are working directly with the next generation who will influence the future greatly. These children will be our leaders in the next few years so the work we do with them is shaping the future for everyone. (2012 – 20)

However, there were concerns expressed about how others did not value the work they did (these others not only included people outside the EC field, but other EC practitioners as well):

People who work with children are generally extremely passionate about their work and take their profession very seriously yet it is still not recognised as a professional job. Supporting staff

whose career is not recognised through professional wages is a continuing difficulty. Empowering these staff to value their career is also an obstacle. (2013 – 33)

[One of my key challenges involves] encouraging parents/families to value early childhood and respect the knowledge and value of caregivers. (2010 – 52)

The data suggest that whilst participants themselves valued their work highly, they felt other EC professionals, and others in the community did not do so to the same extent. These hegemonic negative perceptions held by others in relation to the value of their work impacts on EC leaders’ professional identity, and ultimately on their ability to lead quality improvement initiatives.

The important components of leadership

Table 2 identifies those characteristics presented to participants in relation to leadership capacity. In interpreting this data, we were interested to explore aspects of distributive or catalytic leadership in particular as these relate to the concept of pedagogical leadership. We were also interested to see if conceptions of the different cohorts were different as the NQF and EYLF became more familiar to professionals since its early days around our first data collection point (2010) and presumably its increasing familiarity 3 years later (2013). However, the ANOVA indicated that there were no significant differences between the different cohorts in the importance assigned to each leadership capacity over the period 2010–2013 ($F = .850$ Significance = .674). All items were rated above 3 which indicates participants felt they were all important capacities.

We expected that key characteristics of pedagogical leadership would be present in participants’ perceptions. The key elements that we thought represented pedagogical leadership included: develop individual and collective capacity (rated 7th⁼),² develop and sustain relationships (rated

Table 2. Participants’ ratings of important leadership capacities

What do you think are the most important things an early childhood leader should have the capacity to do?	Average rating (ranking) across all cohorts
Advocate for all children and families	3.93 (1)
Develop and sustain relationships	3.92 (2)
Develop and manage self	3.85 (3=)
Create and share knowledge	3.85 (3=)
Promote inquiry and reflection	3.82 (5)
Sustain partnerships and networks	3.8 (6)
Think and plan strategically	3.77 (7=)
Develop individual and collective capacity	3.77 (7=)
Shape and lead pedagogy	3.73 (9)
Shape the future	3.71 (10)
Align actions with shared values	3.70 (11)
Hold self and others to account	3.68 (12)
Develop a unique service culture	3.61 (13)
Align resources with desired outcomes	3.58 (14)
Focus on achievement	3.35 (15)

2nd), shape and lead pedagogy (rated 9th), promote inquiry and reflection (rated 5th) and create and share knowledge (rated 3rd⁺). The ranking of these elements suggests that key elements of pedagogical leadership are not yet strongly embedded in participants' perceptions of leadership capacity.

Within this list of important capacities, the overall average rating across the period showed that participants rated the most important capacity for leaders was to act as an advocate for children and families but this was not reflected in their written reflections. The ability to develop and sustain relationships (ranked 2nd), and develop and manage self (ranked 3rd⁺) were also rated highly. A focus on achievement was rated as least important (ranked 15th). The items considered relatively unimportant were align resources with desired outcomes (ranked 14th) and develop a unique service culture (ranked 13th).

Table 3 presents participants ratings and our subsequent rankings of early career leadership potential. Again the ANOVA indicates that perceptions of early career leadership potential did not change between the different cohorts over the period 2010–2013 ($F = .444$, significance = .933). The characteristics most strongly associated with pedagogical leadership were identified as: constantly questions own practice (ranked 6th), guides and mentors during professional experience (ranked 5th), and critically evaluates and tries new ideas and ways of working (ranked 2nd). Another characteristic, willingness to work with others, was rated as the most important indicator of potential leadership. Critically evaluating and trying new ideas and ways of working (2nd) and dedication (3rd) are also key indicators. Least important is having a variety of teaching experiences (7th).

Table 4 identifies participants' ratings of important leadership characteristics. There was no significant difference in leadership characteristics identified between the different cohorts over the period 2010–2013 ($F = 1.294$, significance = .283). Characteristics most closely aligned with pedagogical leadership were ranked by participants as follows: empowering (ranked 3rd⁺), mentor, coach or guide (ranked 3rd⁺) and knowledgeable (ranked 5th). The most important characteristic of an effective leader in our participants' minds is the ability to be proactive. Another important

Table 3. Participants' ratings of important early career leadership attributes

What indicators of leadership potential would you identify as important in early childhood professionals at the start of their career? (i.e. what do we look for to identify a leader of the future?)	Average rating (ranking) across all cohorts
Willingness to work with others	3.94 (1)
Critically evaluates and tries new ideas and ways of working	3.88 (2)
Dedication	3.83 (3)
Attitude for lifelong learning	3.78 (4)
Guides and mentors during professional experience	3.72 (5)
Constantly questions own practice	3.68 (6)
A variety of teaching experiences	3.30 (7)

Table 4. Participants’ ratings of important leadership characteristics

In your experience, what personal characteristics (if any) do you consider to be important to being an effective leader in an early childhood setting?	Average rating (ranking) across all cohorts
Proactive	3.86 (1)
Professionally confident	3.81 (2)
Empowering	3.80 (3=)
Mentor, coach or guide	3.80 (3=)
Knowledgeable	3.76 (5)
Visionary	3.68 (6)
Kind, warm, friendly, nurturing, sympathetic	3.66 (7)
Rational, logical, analytical	3.52 (8)
Systematic planner	3.45 (9)
Goal oriented	3.42 (10)
Courage	3.41 (11)
Influential	3.38 (12)
Assertive	3.35 (13)
Business oriented	3.04 (14)
Calculated risk-taker	2.92 (15)

characteristic was being professionally competent (2nd). The least important characteristic is that of being able to take calculated risks (15th). Being business oriented was ranked 14th although its rating (at 3.04) indicated that participants still thought this was relatively important.

As discussed above, pedagogical leadership has a focus on mentoring and supporting staff development enacted through the relationships between staff members; in other words, relationships with staff are a tool that enables pedagogical leaders to improve overall service quality. Our participants identified the relationship component of their work as particularly important (rated as 2nd in Table 2). Maintaining relationships was more important to them than their roles as mentors or guides as illustrated by their ratings in Tables 2 and 4. In Table 2, they rated ‘develop individual and collective capacity’ as 8th most important and ‘shape and lead pedagogy’ as 9th⁼ of 14 capacities. However, in contrast, in Table 4, the characteristic ‘Mentor, coach or guide’ was rated 3rd⁼ of 15 characteristics. The pedagogical leadership role is in its infancy in EC in Australia, and there is a confused understanding of what the role encompasses as summarized by one of our 2013 participants:

Being a peer it’s difficult to approach other educators to discuss areas that I think need further development in their teaching. It’s also been challenging to put my philosophy and biases aside when reviewing other educations and their practices. (2013 – 18)

The quote illustrates ongoing confusion between leadership as encompassing management (i.e. as a peer it is difficult to approach others and talk about their practice) and pedagogical leadership as mentoring and supporting. As the data above show, developing capacity and enhancing the capacity of others is still not yet clearly understood as part of the pedagogical leadership role, even though our participants rated mentoring, coaching and guiding as important components of their leadership. We

wonder to what extent this confusion is common to many early childhood professionals across Australia.

Do leaders challenge the hegemonic discourse of early childhood?

To this point, we have looked at our data in terms of our participants' understanding of the dominant discourse in early childhood, and their role as pedagogical leaders in supporting others to improve their performance within that discourse. However, we argued above that professionalization of early childhood can occur in two ways: one through adherence to the dominant discourse and one through a bottom-up self-identification of what is important in early childhood. This latter, called activist professionalization by Fenech and colleagues (Fenech, Sumsion, & Shepherd, 2010), may not necessarily involve a challenge to the official discourse, but does require an understanding of the underpinning ideologies and reflection on ways in which aims can be met through a range of strategies developed appropriate to context. The role of leaders is different for each of these approaches: for the former leaders take responsibility to mentor and guide other early childhood professionals to increase quality through understanding and enacting the dominant discourse. For the latter, the role of leaders is to question the dominant discourse, and to support other professionals to reflect upon their work and develop their own performance of high-quality practice that follows underlying principles, meets agreed outcomes but travels a contextually appropriate (unique for each child) path to get there. As expressed by Fenech et al. (2010, p. 92): activist professionals '... critically reflect on the "state of play" so as to generate options where they can act rather than be acted on'.

Thus, in this section, we actively looked in the data for any evidence that our participants were engaged in reflection in relation to challenges to the dominant discourse. Many of the participants reported they saw the role of leaders was to support their service through the required changes that follow from the national quality agenda. We interpreted this as representing an acceptance of the dominant discourse rather than challenging it:

An early childhood leader needs to be knowledgeable & articulate in Acts Regulations, services available to children & their families, able to communicate effectively with a wide range of people with varying needs, a mentor to others. (2010 – 85)

A key issue for Early Years leaders is the significant changes that are taking place which will require leader to manage and champion change within the industry. (2011 – 28)

At the present time our sector is undergoing significant change at a very rapid rate. Strong and effective leadership is vital in order to ensure that changes are understood by all those experiencing it and that all participants are supported. (2012 – 29)

Regulation changes and constantly updating NQS and NQF. (2013 – 19)

This is currently an area in which we are experiencing great change and so leaders in this sector are not only leading current practice but leading the culture of change. Getting bodies of staff to take ownership for their part in the changes can be a difficult learning curve for leaders in this sector. (2013 – 46)

Few identified their role as leaders in shaping or even challenging the changes to better meet the needs of the sector:

Advocate for greater affordability, recurrent funding for non universal services and demonstration of inclusive practices that are reflected in day to day operation and strategic planning. Remaining authentic to the purpose and goals of the service and a relevance to the local community. (2010 – 79)

I think another exciting aspect for this sector is that service provision is being driven by child and family needs rather than a purely business and funding model. For me it opens up ideas, opportunity, flexibility and creativity in the work and interactions within the sector and wider community. (2011 – 83)

Being able to advocate for our profession within the community, opening the door for discussions about pedagogy and reflective practice and its' importance in the early childhood field. (2013 – 20)

In Table 2, participants identified that they thought advocacy was the most important capability in leadership but their interpretation of advocacy was linked to advocating for children and families (not *WITH* them) and not advocating for (and influencing) the further development of their profession:

You are advocating for a group of 'clients' that need you to do this because they are children and have limited ability to be their own advocates. (2010 – 35)

In the Early Childhood sector, leaders have the ability to advocate for those who are yet not able to advocate for themselves. (2011 – 95)

In taking on this perception of advocacy, that of speaking for (not with) children, the EC leaders were reflecting a common understanding of advocacy (Oliver, 2008). This perhaps explains why they rated advocacy important, but did not reflect advocacy on behalf of their profession as an issue of concern in their comments.

Discussion

We argue that ECLs could choose to function in two different ways: through supporting others to improve practice by better understanding the dominant discourse or through self-identification of what is quality in each individual context, to some extent guided by shared understandings of principles and ideologies but taking the freedom to enact these in different ways. At the extreme of this approach, reflection on guiding principles and ideologies is required for the ongoing evolution of early childhood as a profession and a necessary role for leaders to undertake if the profession is to avoid ossification.

In some ways, this differentiation reflects the different approaches to quality assurance evident between Australia and the Nordic countries. The quality assurance approach used in Australian early childhood was drawn from business and focuses on the need for accountability (Ishimine et al., 2009). This approach requires a shared understanding of quality, and assumes that, within the national context, quality is both universal and measureable. The alternative approach, evident in the Nordic

countries (Karila, 2012) focuses more on co-construction of learning between individual educator and child. Highly trained early childhood pedagogues are expected to have the knowledge and skills to enact high-quality practice in each unique context. This social pedagogical approach runs counter to the learning approach used in Australia (although Karila suggests this might be changing in some Nordic countries).

The participants in this study were clearly operating under the first model: they identified their leadership as involving supporting and mentoring others in understanding and operationalizing the discourse of early childhood quality captured in the current Australian policy documents and regulations. This matches what Fenech and colleagues (Fenech et al., 2010) see as a technical, objective performance of professionalization: ‘... technical standardised applications of top-down, “expert” knowledge that meets objective accountability measures for the purpose of attaining optimal developmental outcomes for children’ (p. 89). Whilst we argue that this pedagogical leadership is enacted through relationships (that is, relationships are a tool used in mentoring), our participants identified the relationship component of their leadership as more important than the mentoring role. Doing relationship work is often seen as a feminine attribute in leadership (Paris, Howell, Dorfman, & Hanges, 2009) and the highly female nature of the early childhood workforce perhaps means that leaders are more likely to identify good relationships as an end in themselves, rather than a tool to achieve other outcomes such as quality improvement through mentoring. Given that our participants’ understandings of leadership are focused on relationships, rather than on the end point of quality improvement (achieved through mentoring), does this mean they will be less effective as pedagogical leaders? Or will we see quality improvements driven through positive relationships even though there is less conscious attention on mentoring?

We suggest that our leaders are at the beginning of their leadership journey, and assume that their experiences may reflect the experiences of many other ECLs across Australasia. Our participants’ behaviour appears to be similar to that of practitioners in the UK (Hordern, 2012; Osgood, 2009), where the focus appears to be one of compliance, of developing the leadership skills to operationalize the notions of early childhood professionalization embedded in the new quality frameworks. Certainly these frameworks were developed with extensive input from the profession (Sumison & Grieshaber, 2012) and the EYLF itself is not intended to be a set of ‘rules’ for professionals to follow. However, the beginning leaders in this study do not demonstrate in their comments that they are reflecting on / critiquing the early childhood discourse provided to them by the current policy documents and frameworks. Rather they are focused on improving their understanding so they can support others to enact them.

What are the implications for the professionalization of early childhood in Australia given that ECLs (as represented by participants in this study, and potentially representative of more widely held views) do not appear to be willing to challenge the current understandings of quality defined for them by current legislation and regulations? Can an unquestioning acceptance of a dominant discourse lead to a valued profession?

We argue that ongoing reflection and critique of any discourse is necessary for healthy evolution. The leaders in this study are currently grappling with understanding the current early childhood discourse, and how to motivate, inspire and support other members of their teams to enact the discourse in practice. Few are actively challenging the discourse and asking themselves: is this what I see as quality? Are there other principles and outcomes I think are important for the children/families/communities with whom I work? How do the understandings of early childhood practice articulated in these documents (the EYLF, NQS) fit with my experiences and my understandings? What do these documents identify as an early childhood professional and the early childhood profession? Is that how I see my role? Where are the gaps?

As in any profession, it is important that we engage in this ongoing reflection so that understandings of high quality evolve to reflect new knowledge and incorporate new ways of doing things. Leaders have a key role in this ongoing evolution. Given that the leadership in early childhood is in its infancy, we have yet a long way to go to develop and empower a group of professionals with the confidence to continually drive improvements in our conceptualization of what makes our profession. Such reflection and resistance (Fenech et al., 2010) ‘... is grounded in ethical practice that is driven by an intentional commitment to continually deconstruct taken-for-granted truths and reconstruct practices’ (p. 92). Foucault (1980) suggests this resistance rests with individuals operating in their own unique contexts by professionals who operate with agency. Agency requires social and physical capital: resources such as supportive colleagues, environment and management committee, a community and families who are willing to pay fees to enable a level of service delivery greater than the regulated minimum and access to other professionals mutually engaged in challenging reflection. Few services have access to such capital. As a profession we need to keep advocating for improvements to provide that capital more equitably to our practitioner colleagues and we need to provide the intellectual stimulation and challenges in our pre-service and in-service education that will support the active resistance driving the evolution of the current early childhood discourse.

Notes

1. Victoria is a state of Australia. In this context, the word ‘Victorian’ refers to those who live in Victoria.
2. When ‘=’ is used in this context it means that the ranking is shared with another item—i.e. 7th= means that there were two items that received the same ranking of 7.

References

- Alvesson, M., & Spicer, A. (2012). Critical leadership studies: The case for critical performativity. *Human Relations*, 65, 367–390.
- Bass, B. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership. (2007). *The developmental learning framework for school leaders* (p. 24). Melbourne: Office of School Education, Department of Education Victoria.

- Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership. (2012). Leading people in early childhood settings. Retrieved September 27, 2013, from <https://www.bastow.vic.edu.au/leadership-courses/leadership-programs/Pages/leading-people-early-childhood-settings.aspx?source=http%3A%2F%2Fsecurewww.bastow.vic.edu.au%2Fleadership-courses%2Fleadership-programs%2FPages%2Fleadership-development-programs.aspx>
- Burns, M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Chalke, J. (2013). Will the early years professional please stand up? Professionalism in the early childhood workforce in England. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 14, 212–222. doi:10.2304/ciec.2013.14.3.212
- Clark, R. (2012). ‘I’ve never thought of myself as a leader but ...’: The early years professional and catalytic leadership. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 20, 391–401. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2012.704762
- Cumming, T., Sumsion, J., & Wong, S. (2013). Reading between the lines: An interpretative meta-analysis of ways early childhood educators negotiate discourses and subjectivities informing practice. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 14, 223–240. doi:10.2304/ciec.2013.14.3.223
- DeRue, S., & Ashford, S. (2010). Who will lead and who will follow? A social process of leadership identity construction in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 35, 627–647.
- Dutton, J., Roberts, L., & Bednar, J. (2010). Pathways for positive identity construction at work: Four types of positive identity and the building of social resources. *Academy of Management Review*, 35, 265–293.
- Fenech, M., Sumsion, J., & Shepherd, W. (2010). Early childhood teachers as professionals: Resisting sameness in early childhood education and care. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 11, 89–105. doi:10.2304/ciec.2010.11.1.89
- Fenech, S. (2013). Leadership development during times of reform. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 38, 89–94.
- Forrest, R. (2002). *Self-awareness of beginning leaders in child care centres*. Brisbane: (Doctor of Education), Queensland University of Technology.
- Forrest, R. (2009). The teacher educator’s role in students learning to lead. In A. Gibbons & C. Gibbs (Eds.), *Conversations on early childhood teacher education. Voices from the working forum for teacher educators* (pp. 126–239). Redmond, WA: World Forum Foundation and New Zealand Tertiary College.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge*. New York, NY: Pantheon.
- Glaser, B. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social Problems*, 12, 436–445.
- Grarock, M., & Morrissey, A.-M. (2013). Teachers’ perceptions of their abilities to be educational leaders in Victorian childcare settings. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 38, 4–12.
- Greenberg, J. (1987). Cultivating an image justice: Looking fair on the job. *Academy of Management Executive*, 2, 155–157.
- Grint, K. (2005). Problems, problems, problems: The social construction of ‘leadership’. *Human Relations*, 58, 1467–1494.
- Gronn, P. (2002). Distributed leadership. In K. Leithwood & P. Hallinger (Eds.), *Second international handbook of educational leadership and administration* (pp. 653–696). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Hadfield, M., Jopling, M., Needham, M., Waller, T., Coleyshaw, L., Emira, M., & Royle, K. (2012). *Longitudinal study of early years professional status: An exploration of progress, leadership and impact. Final report* (Vol. DFE-RR239c). Wolverhampton: CeDare, University of Wolverhampton.
- Harris, A., Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., & Hopkins, D. (2007). Distributed leadership and organizational change: Reviewing the evidence. *Journal of Educational Change*, 8, 337–347.
- Heikka, J., & Waniganayake, M. (2011). Pedagogical leadership from a distributed perspective within the context of early childhood education. *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice*, 14, 499–512. doi:10.1080/13603124.2011.577909
- Ho, D. (2012). The paradox of power in leadership in early childhood education. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 87, 253–266. doi:10.1080/0161956X.2012.664479
- Hordern, J. (2012). A productive system of early years professional development. *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, 33, 106–218. doi: 10.1080/09575146.2012.744958
- Inzlicht, M., & Kang, S. (2010). Stereotype threat spillover: How coping with threats to social identity affects aggression, eating, decision making, and attention. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 99, 467–481. doi:10.1037/a0018951
- Ishimine, K., Tayler, C., & Thorpe, K. (2009). Accounting for quality in Australian childcare: A dilemma for policymakers. *Journal of Education Policy*, 24, 717–732.

- Jones, S., Lefoe, G., Harvey, M., & Ryland, K. (2012). Distributed leadership: A collaborative framework for academics, executives and professionals in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 34, 67–78. doi:10.1080/1360080X.2012.642334
- Karila, K. (2012). A nordic perspective on early childhood education and care policy. *European Journal of Education*, 47, 584–595.
- Kreig, S., Davis, K., & Smith, K. (in press). Exploring the dance of early childhood leadership. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*.
- Male, T., & Palaiologou, I. (2012). Learning-centred leadership or pedagogical leadership? An alternative approach to leadership in education contexts. *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice*, 15, 107–118. doi:10.1080/13603124.2011.617839
- Murray, J., & Clark, R. (2013). Reframing leadership as a participative pedagogy: The working theories of early years professionals. *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, 33, 289–301. doi:10.1080/09575146.2013.781135
- Oliver, C. (2008). Setting the scene: Funding, patterns of advocacy provision and children's access to advocacy services. In J. Dalrymple & C. Oliver (Eds.), *Developing advocacy for children and young people. Current issues in research and practice* (pp. 26–56). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Ortlipp, M., Arthur, L., & Woodrow, C. (2011). Discourses of the early years learning framework: Constructing the early childhood professional. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 12, 56–70.
- Osgood, J. (2009). Childcare workforce reform in England and the 'early years professional': A critical discourse analysis. *Journal of Education Policy*, 24, 733–751.
- Paris, L., Howell, J., Dorfman, P., & Hanges, P. (2009). Preferred leadership prototypes of male and female leaders in 27 countries. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 40, 1396–1405. doi:10.1057/jibs.2008.114
- Rise, J., Sheeran, P., & Hukkelberg, S. (2010). The role of self-identity in the theory of planned behavior: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 40, 1085–1105.
- Semann, A. (2013). Leadership as an art form in the making. *Belonging Early Years Journal*, 2, 58–59.
- Simpson, D. (2010). Being professional? Conceptualising early years professionalism in England. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 18, 5–14. doi:10.1080/13502930903520009
- Stamopoulos, E. (2012). Reframing early childhood leadership. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 37, 42–47.
- Sumsion, J., Barnes, S., Cheeseman, S., Harrison, L., Kennedy, A., & Stonehouse, A. (2009). Insider perspectives on developing belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 34, 4–13.
- Sumsion, J., & Grieshaber, S. (2012). Pursuing better childhoods and futures through curriculum: Utopian visions in the development of Australia's early years learning framework. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 2, 230–444. doi: 10.2304/gsch.2012.2.3.230
- Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (Eds.). (2010). *Early childhood matters. Evidence from the effective pre-school and primary education Project*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Waniganayake, M., Cheesman, S., Fenech, M., Hadley, F., & Shepherd, W. (2012). *Leadership: Contexts and complexities in early childhood education*. Melbourne: Open University Press.
- Watt, H., & Richardson, P. (2008). Motivations, perceptions and aspirations concerning teaching as a career for different types of beginning teachers. *Leading and Instruction*, 18, 408–428.
- Williamson, K. (2006). Research in constructivist frameworks using ethnographic techniques. *Library Trends*, 55, 83–101.